

**A Research Proposal on Quest for Identity and the Myth of Home: A Study of  
Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters***

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## Introduction:

This synopsis is concerned with the study of “Quest for Identity and the Myth of Home in *Family Matters*” by Rohinton Mistry through the lens of Multiculturalism theory. No work had been done to explore this very significant aspect in *Family Matters* even though various critic works and research papers have been done extensively on *Family Matters*. Dr. Kuldip Awasthi in his paper “Migration and Sense of Home and Homelessness in the Novels of Rohinton Mistry” talks about homelessness, identity crisis of the Parsi. A. Thavamani talks about the Parsi identity in “Diasporic Consciousness and Parsi Identity” in Rohinton Mistry’s work. During the course of my research a thorough and critical analysis of Mistry *Family Matters* will be done that will be useful to literary discourse in future.

## Objectives:

The researcher will critically analyse the text keeping these objectives in mind.

- 1) To analyse the text of Rohinton Mistry who emerges as a double-displaced diasporic writer.
- 2) To investigate the essence of ‘Home’. Is it a myth or reality?
- 3) To explore the identity of the protagonist Nariman Vakeel of *Family Matters*.

Rohinton Mistry is one of the most prolific Parsi writers who have won a number of prizes and accolades for his works. *Such a Long Journey* was his first novel published in 1991 followed by *Fine Balance* in 1995 and *Family Matters* in 2002. What made Mistry stand out is his depiction of the Parsi community that is slowly dying, in spite of its glorious past and its contribution to Modern India. The settings of his novels are Bombay. Mistry’s nostalgia and search for belongingness is reflected in his works.

## Multiculturalism Theory:

Multiculturalism is a late twentieth century, literary, socio-political movement in anthropology, sociology, political philosophy and literature. The term multiculturalism means the acceptance and support of cultural diversity. Bhikhu Parekh quotes in his work “What is Multiculturalism?”

From a multiculturalists perspective the good societies cherishes the diversity of and encourages a creative dialogue, its different cultures and moral visions. Such a society not only respects its member rights to their culture and increases their range of choices but also cultivates their power of self criticism, self determination, imagination, intellectual and moral sympathy and contribute to their development and well being(Parekh 3).

But in order to understand what multiculturalism is, we should know what culture is. The term ‘culture’ is complex with multi-layered meanings. Culture is dynamic. It is evolving and growing. Culture is a set of beliefs, custom, traditions, institutions. According to T.S Eliot “Culture means the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs and in their religion” (Eliot 20). The principles of Multiculturalism include peaceful co-existence of culture and sub-cultures, concern for minorities’ cultures, equality of rights and equality of opportunities. Multiculturalism in literature focus on the culture, beliefs, traditions and on the minorities. Some of the multiculturalism theorists are Homi Bhabha who talks about “hybridity”, “Third Space Theory” and Edward Said.

The present synopsis will be analysed with the use of Multiculturalism theory. How the values of Multiculturalism were celebrated and how they were violated in the novel.

Mistry is a double-displaced diasporic writer. Being a Parsee, who fled the religious persecution from the Arab and came to settle in India during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century, they are in

diasporia in India too. They assimilated into the Indian culture at the same time maintaining their ethnic identity and culture. As a writer Mistry believe in quality, which is reflected in his works. He brings alive the Parsi culture and the challenges faced by his community. Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist states the Parsis are “a hybridized community often their rituals pay formal respect to Hindu customs and rituals while articulating their own religious and ethnic identity. Then what is interesting about Parsis is their own sense of a negotiated cultural identity” (Bhabha 80-84).

One of the significant contribution of the foreign to Indian multiculturalism is by the Persian. The influence of the Persian can be seen in the architecture, language, literature, music, cuisine etc. Rohinton Mistry works reflects the alienation, identity crisis, belongingness and realistically describe the Parsi ways of life, customs, traditions, religion and their struggle to preserve their ethnic identity. His novels deals with a wide range of socio-political issues, the problems faced by minorities in India. “Thus Mistry creates a vibrant image of a community caught in a cycle of restrictive traditions, economic needs, racial and religious tensions, as well as inner psychological conflicts”(Malak 90). With diversity of cultures, in one way or the other, the minorities are marginalized by the majority group. I agree with Bharucha on what she says about Mistry’s diasporic status:

As an Indian who lives and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diasporia. However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a Persian whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in Diasporia even in India. Like other Parsi writing, his writings is informed by this experience of double-displacement (Bharucha23).

His first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) is set in Bombay and deals with historical movements such as the Partition of India, the Indo-China War of 1962, India and Pakistan War of 1971 which led to the creation of Bangladesh. An in-depth analysis of *Such a Long Journey* shows how the Parsi community was marginalized.

*A Fine Balance* (1995) consists of a paradoxical situations, which move the reader to deep pity and even draw tears from one's eyes. An in-depth reading confirms " 'a fine balance' between memory and desire, myth and reality, internal and external reality" (Negi 81). Mistry through his novel reveal the reality of the minorities in post- independence India.

Rohinton Mistry in *Family Matters* focus on a particular Parsi family and brings out the universal message of love, death and the deterioration of human values both at home and society which results in corruption , communalism, fanaticism etc . Mistry's Nariman Vakeel represents Everyman. Through his characters Mistry gives voice to the voiceless. Nariman Vakeel is the voice of the subalterns in a post- independence multicultural India.

Nariman quest for identity is the main crisis in the novel. The lost of his love led to the lost of his identity and haunts him till the end. He is like a puppet in the hands of his family and community. He suppressed his happiness for them which lead to his identity crisis. "In my youth, my parents controlled me and betrayed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age. I won't allow it (Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters* 8). Nariman nostalgia for the past about his life with Lucy reflects the Parsi community nostalgia about their glorious past.

Multiculturalism believes in the equality of all individuals irrespective of gender. In the novel we can see that those values are exploited through the life of Nariman Vakeel. He is not the victim of a single force but of forces like old value system, culture, religion and of his blood

relations. Nariman and Lucy made an attempt to develop their 'own way of life' i.e their 'subculture'. They fought for 11 years to be accepted by their families but failed. In the end, they surrender to their dominant culture which didn't allow them to establish 'a subculture'.

He thought about the eleven years he and Lucy had struggled to create a world for themselves. A cocoon, she used to call it. A cocoon was what they needed, she said, into which they could retreat, and after their families had forgotten their existence, they would emerge like two glistening butterflies and fly away together(13).

Nariman is a modern man. He doesn't believe in religion and custom. He is ready to exchange cultural ethos. He faces alienation even in his own home when he refuses to give up on Lucy. Nariman's parents are an orthodox Parsi who believes in racial purity. For them Lucy is not a decent and respectable and labeled Nariman and Lucy relationship as "ill-considered liason"(12). Through this Mistry shows how orthodox is dangerous to a community, which never provides a chance for progress. In *Family Matters* Nariman Vakeel who was slowly withering from old age diseases Osteoporosis and Parkinson symbolized the slowly dwindling Parsi community.

Characters like Nariman, Yezad, Jal and Coomy find solace in the past. They became the prisoners of their past. They are questioning their identity in one way or the other. Yezad, who in the beginning was a liberal man and doesn't believe in religion, rituals find solace in his religion and became a Parsi fanatic in the end. In order to find his identity and root he turned to religion and became a strong believer of Parsi customs and purity of race "because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages destroy that (419). His own son called him 'bigot' (419). Yezad's fanaticism can also be seen when he accuses Murad of having a relationship with a Maharastrian girl Anjali. "You can have any friends you like, any race or

religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different”(419). Jaydipsinh Dodiya narrates in his book *Perspective on The Novels of Rohinton Mistry*; “The jobless, disappointed Yezad turned into a Parsi fanatic, pouring over sacred texts round the clock and prayers at the fire temple, cursing his sons as they became more secular, westernized and eager to cuddle with non-Parsi girl (90)”.

Coomy and Jal identity crisis is evident throughout the novel. Being a stepchildren of Nariman Vakeel and without adopting the surname Vakeel it add to their identity crisis. Their mother Yasmin didn't let them adopt Vakeel surname because “to change it to Vakeel would be like rewriting history ” (Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters* 18). They are Contractor by blood and flesh but Nariman Vakeel raised them up as his own children. This add to their complex love and hate relationship towards Nariman. Because of hyphenated relationship they felt that Nariman doesn't love and care for them like he care for Roxanna whom they describe as his “own flesh and blood, not like Jal and me, second class”(9). Jal and Coomy collection of childhood toys shows their attempt to find their identity in the past. “ “Shrine” was their secret word for the cutter of knick-knacks, toys and glassware that packed the shelves of the cabinet venerated by Jal and Coomy”(25). It also contains prizes Jal and Coomy had won at school when their father was present. They keep all these toys to cheer them up when they feel lonely. Through this Mistry show how a person fixation on the past affect their present.

Multiculturalism advocate peaceful co-existence of cultures in a nation. Multiculturalism propagate equality irrespective of caste, race, gender, class. It celebrates cultural pluralism. In *Family Matters* we can see that these values are violated. The word ‘home’ connotes stability, happiness, acceptance, love where every members work for the well being of each other. But when this very vision of ‘home’ is disrupted it results in alienation, displacement,

insecurities, quest for identity and rootlessness. Avtar Brah states that the “issues of home, belonging, and identity is one that is perennially contested. It is” no longer a settled issue... even for those who consider themselves secure in their own sense of belonging”(180). In the novel we can see a stark contrast between the two homes ‘Chateau Felicity’ and ‘Pleasant Villa’. The name ‘Chateau Felicity’ is ironical because it doesn’t stand for what the name mean. It is just a ‘myth’ because in reality it is a house of unhappiness. The people living in that house are not happy with each other. “Hell has ways of permeating heaven’s membrane”, and “especially indoors” (6). While the resident of Pleasant Villa live happily and contentedly in their small world.

The title *Family Matters* have double meaning. Firstly it refers to domestic life and secondly it refers to nation as a family where different cultures, race, religion live together as members of a nation. Just as disruption in a domestic home brings out imbalances, the same happen to the nation. Anti-social elements like racial discrimination, communalism, corruption and violence brings about disturbances in a national life. The abolition of the Babri Masjid results in communal riots that shook India. This incident made a mockery of the Indian Constitution that advocates secularism. The communal riots that broke out after the riots made the minorities question their identity and belongingness. They felt alienated, abused in their own homeland. In the novel Husain was the victim of this riot where he lost all his family members. He felt insecure, helpless even in his own home i.e Bombay.

In those riots the police were behaving like gangster. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the



law were murdering everyday: and my poor wife and children. I couldn't even recognize them (133).

In the novel the Hindu nationalism is seen through the Shiv Sena, supported by the local. Mistry condemn Shiv Sena through his writing. "Corruption is in the air we breath. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks" (28). I agree with Morey remarks that the "moral taint that everywhere affects Bombay life also increasingly makes its presence felt in the lives of Nariman's family" (Morey 133). The native people opposed multicultural scene of Bombay possession of main assets of land and infrastructure, business by non-native people of alien cultures. Their domination of money, power, language and progress. "And what about all the hatred of minorities that Shiv Sena has spread for the last thirty years"(29). As an opposition, they became violent and tried to reestablish their native rule for getting the ways to do it, whether legal or illegal like changing names of streets, which were named after foreign leaders is one way of opposition.

In the novel Mistry portrayed Bombay as mini India where people of different religions, caste, race, culture coexist. Mistry expresses his emotions of mind through his pen, which has an ink of love, praise and beauty for the city Bombay. Mr Kapur is the perfect example of multiculturalism. Mr. Kapur has a deep and profound love for Bombay which is "like the pure love for a beautiful woman"(131). Mr. Kapur shop looks like a multicultural family where the family members live together and share the ideas, embracing and respecting the cultural differences. His workers are from different community working in unity and in harmony. Mr Kapur celebrates all festivals like Diwali, Christmas, Id, Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi etc.

In this shop we will celebrate all festivals: Divali, Christmas, Id, your Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi, everything. We'll decorate

the windows, put up appropriate greetings with lights and all. We are going to be a mini-Bombay, an example to our neighbourhood (137).

It shows his broadminded and modern outlook towards life. He laments on the deplorable condition of Bombay plagued with violence, corruption.” If the woman you love is being molested, will you do nothing just because you are outnumbered? No, you’ll defend her, end up beaten and bloody, maybe dead, and God knows how much it will help her. But you’ll still intervene” (135). “My beloved Bombay is being raped” (135).

In the novel the very word ‘home’ becomes a myth because instead of protecting and providing security, it became a contesting ground for who belong to it and who are ”outsider”. And as such the feeling of belongingness to a home is threatened that made the minorities question their identity and the place they hold in multicultural India. The protagonist forceful eviction from his own home by his stepchildren reflects the displacement of minorities in their own homeland.”The novel shows the decline of secularism, the communalisation of Indian identity, and the parochialisation of Bombay”(Herbert 289).

#### Literature Review:

In “Diasporic Consciousness in the Writings of Rohinton the Mistry” Dr. Vijay Negi talks about the nature of Diaspora and how the diasporic writer Rohinton Mistry uses memories to express in his works.

Dr. A Vidhyarati in “The impact of social suppression in the characters of Rohinton Mistry’s Family Matters” talks about suppression which the characters faced not only from the dominant culture but from their own community as well.

N. Kavitha, B. Subashini and Dr. Venugopal in “A Study on Multicultural Aspects in the Select Works of Rohinton Mistry” talks about Mistry as an Indo-Canadian writer and how he

was influenced by the multicultural aspects of India. Writing from Canada with India as the setting of his novel, Mistry highlights the socio-political condition of India post- independence.

Research Methodology:

For the methodology, the researcher will use the latest 7<sup>th</sup> edition of MLA Style Sheet. Multiculturalism theory will be applied to critically analyze the text. I will also made use of Lovely Professional University libraries for my secondary sources. The researcher will also refer to the latest works of the critics on Rohinton Mistry works.

Outcome of the research:

- 1) This study will add to the study of multiculturalism in Indian culture and will be useful for the researcher engage in this field.
- 2) The present study will be valuable because the preservation of different cultures will lead towards the integrity and truthfulness of society.
- 3) The study will be very much relevant to the present Indian society where the minorities are marginalized based on their culture and religion. It will help in understanding the complex cultural mosaic of India and embracing and tolerance of cultural hybridity by its people.

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